

Every year on Veterans Day, we honor the sacrifice, courage and bravery of the men and women who have worn the uniform on behalf of America. For years, they have defended our country to provide us with the peace of mind we need to live our lives free and independent. As one of a handful of members of Congress who have served in the military, I believe the best way we can repay our country's heroes is to help provide them the same peace of mind they have granted us. I'm pleased to say that we have worked in a bipartisan manner over the past few years to significantly improve the lives of America's veterans nationwide, particularly with regards to the healthcare services they receive.

With this year's budget, Congress has made the largest commitment to improving veterans' healthcare in a generation. This funding has strengthened healthcare for more than 5 million veterans, including more than 72,000 veterans in North Florida, by adding 17,000 new VA doctors and nurses; establishing 145 community outpatient clinics and 92 new veteran centers for local counseling and mental health screening; and hiring 8,300 new claim processors to shorten the time it takes veterans to receive their earned benefits. These added services have been critical to meeting the needs of the 363,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan over the last three years.

One of the biggest achievements recently has been the passage of the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act, which will allow Congress to approve funding for veterans medical care a year in advance, ensuring that the VA has adequate time to plan for the best way to deliver efficient and effective healthcare to our veterans. Congress also continues to protect military families from increases in TRICARE co-pays and deductibles and has restored over \$1 billion in military healthcare funding.

In addition to these historic achievements, last year Congress enacted the largest expansion of the G.I. Bill since it was first introduced in 1944, restoring the promise of a full four-year education to those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. This past summer, Congress expanded the program to include all children of service members who have died on active duty since September 11, 2001, making them eligible for the full education benefit.

I have the distinct honor of representing a number of brave men and women who have previously worn the uniform, as well as those currently serving our country stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base and the Navy base in Panama City. I'm pleased to say that many of these programs are benefiting our local veterans every day.

Additionally, here at home, I helped open the new VA Clinic in Jackson County last year, and funding was recently secured to open a new veterans' outpatient clinic in Tallahassee. Together, these clinics will provide primary and general care to area veterans as well as a range of specialized services, including mental health screenings, wellness screenings and wound care. Though perhaps most importantly, these clinics ensure that our veterans will have better access to the healthcare they deserve.

Taken together, these advancements mean greater quality of life and peace of mind for our

veterans. But our work is by no means complete. Although November 11 is recognized as the official Veterans Day, I believe we honor our veterans' sacrifice and bravery every day that we wake in a free and democratic country. To thank them properly, it is our duty to ensure that their lives are enriched just as greatly as they have enriched ours.

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